

Catalyst Profile
Stephen Gheen

The story of Stephen Gheen, the WCU alumnus of 1974, is one of bootstrapping and rising above the odds. Though a first-generation college student from a “baby boomer family,” this Shelby native is now Assistant District Attorney for the 9th Judicial District. However, before he began screening cases for superior courts and evaluating electronic legal research, Gheen touted purple and gold.

In 1968, he began his dual major in history and political science at WCU. He was instantly attracted to the college’s “low cost” and proximity to home. While pursuing a degree, he was also “fulfilling the dreams of his parents,” who never had the means of attending a university.

Along the way, professors such as the late Clifford Lovin and Salvator Nerboso encouraged Gheen to continue his education beyond the undergraduate level. Thus, in 1972, he delved into coursework for a master's degree in History with a concentration in political science. During his studies, a graduate position fostered a “love for teaching,” and Gheen even considered going into the education sector.

Still, after being unable to afford a doctorate at the University of Colorado, he headed off to work for the state. Some years later, Gheen would attend North Carolina Central University, taking night classes to earn his doctorate in jurisprudence. He was admitted to the North Carolina State Bar in 1984.

From there, the law degree helped catalyze his career. He served as a partner for Funderburk & Gheen, acting as a trial attorney for both civil and criminal cases in State and Federal Court. For nearly 15 years, he was Deputy Commissioner of the North Carolina Industrial Commission, specializing in workers’ compensation claims.

Gheen has also gleaned experience as Chairman of the Gaston County Elections Board and Director of Productivity for the Department of Natural Resources and Community Development.

In his free time, this former Catamount regularly leads seminars with The North Carolina Advocates for Justice, a nonpartisan association of legal professionals. In 2010, he delivered a presentation titled “Writing a Winning Opinion and Award,” advising listeners to “know thy deputy” and to “cite, cite, cite.”

Beyond legal seminars, Gheen advises current WCU students to strive for something good.

“Aim very high for your life,” said Gheen.